We Don't Appreciate Our Own Sense of Humor!

America Has Evolved a Virile, Vital Art—Vaudeville, Dancing, Musical Comedy, the Movies

By Winifred Ward

THE other day Henry and I were invited to attend a private exhibition of Persian watercolors. We went, only to discover, as usual, that the watercolors were there not because they were good, but because they were Persian.

Indeed, they were so bad that we should have shot out at once had we not been detained by our exuberant hostess, who had captured for this occasion a Frenchman, who happened to be visiting this country on a diplomatic mission. Introductions ensued, and our American hostess cemented our friendship as follows:

"Ah, monsieur," said she, in excellent French, "it is delightful to have your judgment on our little exhibition. Charming, is it not?—so subtle, all this work—so Eastern. In the arts, where are we poor Americans? We must seem so crude to you, with our lack of taste. I know how vulgar we are as a nation—how little we have to offer that compares with this," and she waved her arm toward the mediocre watercolors.

The Frenchman listened in courteous silence.

"Henry, did you agree with that woman?" said I, indignantly, as we rode homeward.

"What woman?" said Henry, unfolding the latest edition of "The Stock Broker's Friend."

"The one who thinks her country ought to be apologized for. Don't you think that we are all right?"

"Sure," said Henry, "everything that's American is all right," and he retired behind the paper. Henry is a true American.

What about it? What have we got to offer foreigners which is vitally ours and different from anything they have got? The worm turns at this everlasting talk about our imitative art, our borrowed drama. And the worst of these accusations is that they are true, as a tour of our art galleries and our so-called "high-class" theaters proves only too well. They are filled with feeble imitations of European art and still feebler adaptations of French and English farce. These things are patronized and encouraged year after year by well dressed and undoubtedly well bred Americans, who are yearning after culture and think they are getting it. And yet they are ignoring the only thing America has to give them—a virile, vital, new-born art which is our own.

Our Art

Where is it? you will ask. Some one must have discovered this treasure or it could not live. You are right, dearie, some one has. It exists in the popular magazines, on the vaudeville stage, in the movies; in all those places frequented by the millions of people whom we refer to as the "lower classes."

Take, for instance, vaudeville. I spend whole evenings wrangling with my intellectual friends as to why I want to go poking off to Keith's to see an unheard of person named Chic Sales do imitations of small town life in the West when they want to go to see a French adaptation of an English farce arranged for American audiences and called "Why Stella Stayed in Bed." "Why," say my friends, regarding gloomily my season ticket to the Palace, "do you pretend to affect what is vulgar?"

As my friends have never been to Keith's, what is the use of telling them that I really feel that second rate attempts at French farce by actors who have not the A B C of French psychology are much more likely to be vulgar than the attempt of native comedians to portray for me our national life, which at least they have some chance of knowing something about?

And to no one who takes the trouble to follow these attempts through the course of a year can there be the slightest doubt as to what America is going to have in the way of art.

Perhaps it's a little premature to say just what form all these young, vigorous attempts at self-expression will finally take. Just at present our charm lies without any doubt in our humor—in a sense of the comic which pervades all the creative work we do; which pervades our whole national life, and which has been pointed out again and again by foreigners as being our most individual trait. Yet this comic sense—this humorous spirit which expresses itself in a thousand ways on all sides of us—is neither enjoyed nor appreciated by the people who talk most about American art and ideals.

It is a popular art, springing from the ordinary mass of the people and so far supported by them only. And in this very fact lies its strength and importance.

In Magazines

Take, for instance, our magazines. Not the art annuals with their impressive accounts of who bought the latest Rembrandt, and what became of the lost Franz Hals—but our popular weeklies, which everybody reads but no one takes seriously.

In them you will find, not a few, but hundreds of examples of American art—drawings so filled with humor and pathos and clever technique and excellent renderings of American types that you cannot turn over the pages without smiling and then laughing and then settling down to read the stories which are so alluringly decorated. Yet who are these humble artists? You have never heard of most of them. They are just "illustrators," as the comedian at Keith's, no matter how excellent, is just "a vaudeville person"—and that is the end of it.

The same rule holds good in dancing—that art so patronized in America—yet in our patronage how little discrimination we show! We rush to see every new fad which claims to hail from Russia or is something Oriental, because the Russian ballet is the fashion and Oriental dancers are considered interesting, no matter how far from truth and art they may stray; yet right under our noses in every popular "show" of the day there flourishes a form of dancing which is ours—which Europe has already recognized and appreciated, but which we still look down upon as vulgar. I refer not only to our clog and buck and wing dancers, whose technique is unrivaled, but still more to the eccentric and character dancing which lends itself so well to the syncopated American music which we have evolved.

In Music

Here again, in the case of music, we mistake our real gifts for borrowed ones. The feebleness of our attempts to create an American grand opera have been attributed to the fact that America has no original composers. America is full of composers who are unequaled in their field; they are the men who write our popular songs, based upon the negro music which is one of our great inheritances, although only the "lower classes" have been clever enough to discover that fact.

Here again European composers have been quicker than we to appreciate American material—Dvorak and Grieg have both used negro melodies in their symphonies and songs.

Again, in the realm of poetry we have filled our magazines for years with the fervid lyrics of ladies who really have nothing to say; it was not till that great artist, Mme. Yvette Guilbert, took the trouble to present them to us that we knew of the splendid ballad poetry that Western America has produced, not to speak of the poems of the negroes. Mme. Guilbert took the trouble to learn our language and present us with these things in a program which she labeled as American, else we would still be ignorant.

Let us come down to the matter a little more closely and see who the men and women are that really represent this modern American gift.

In music the first names that occur to me are Jerome Kern, Baldwin Sloane and Harry Tierney. Go to an academy for musical instruction and ask who these men are. They will scarcely have been heard of and are probably looked down upon with the utmost scorn by the university professor who is composing an opera after the manner of Debussy. But stop the man in the street or the little stenographer on her way to work and ask them if they have ever heard of Jerome Kern! Long after Debussy has been consigned to the scrapheap the lyrics of Jerome Kern will still be singing their way into the hearts of thousands of people. A certain song by Harry Tierney which I heard two years ago is still singing its way through mine, and I have a particularly bad ear for music. And discernible in all music of this type is the humorous element which is distinctively American, a sort of whimsical lightness of touch which is at once youthful and sophisticated.

In the realm of illustration the field is endless. Pick up a copy of "The Metropolitan Magazine" and look at the strong character sketches of Henry Raleigh (any one of these heads, which are sketched so lightly into the ensemble called a "picture," would hold its own if exhibited in an art gallery), or look at the piquant work of May Wilson Preston, or the charming animal studies of Charles Livingston Bull, which are infinitely finer than many imposing daubs in oil which I have seen decorate the walls of a gallery. Then there is Tony Sarg and Everett Shinn, with his fine, nervous technique, full of that sketchy humor we have been seeking, and among black and white artists and newspaper cartoonists you will find even finer work, as, for instance, in "Vanity Fair," where the words "drawing by Fish" have come to mean everything that is arch and sophisticated and witty. Here is technique which would have interested Aubrey Beardsley, and it has its masculine counterpart in a cartoonist named "Gropper," whose work on The New York Tribune seems to me to place him in the foremost rank of American humorists.

The comic spirit among writers is still more reflective of American life—as for instance Stephen Leacock's delicious satire called "Tranquil Hours With the Idle Rich," which is so good as to be really an important contribution to the America of the future as well as of the present—and, second, Grenville Pelham Wodehouse, who has always caught par excellence the American spirit, albeit an Englishman—and then there is Clarence Day and Will Irwin, not to speak of O. Henry, the finest of them all.

"But who," you will say, thinking of the last stupid bill you saw at Keith's, "are these vaudeville artists for whom you claim so much?"

In Vaudeville

First, perhaps, Chic Sales, whose character work is as fine as a delicately wrought etching; or Pat Rooney, with an Irish-American charm to which no poor words of mine can do justice; and in the realm of musical comedy Frances White, who seems to me as finished and exquisite an artist as any comedian on the stage to-day, and Raymond Hitchcock, who strikes perhaps better than any of them the note of mock-serious philosophy so dear to the American public. The names are legion, and many of them unknown to any except theatrical devotees.

In the realm of vaudeville there is a particularly interesting movement toward what would be called among the highbrows "Americanization in art" in the form of the little one-act playlets, which, as we all know, can be so fearfully bad when they are bad, but are, on the other hand, so remarkably interesting when they are good.

I remember one which I saw recently representing a bridal pair on their first night out on a big ocean liner. The scene represents their cabin, and all the noises begin that one hears at night on a big boat—the terrifying clanking of chains and rushing of streams of water, and mysterious shouts and sudden drafts of icy air, etc., causing the nervous little wife to leap out of bed a thousand times, till at last they are so convinced that they have been struck by a submarine that they summon a porter, clinging to each other in terror, only to find that the boat has not yet left the wharf. This little scene was worked up to a swift climax which brought the curtain down to a thunder of applause, and the action, which alone was clever enough to have sustained the piece, was decorated with a rattle of dialogue so quaint and delicious and intimate and American that the audience, in the midst of its excitement, burst again and again into peals of delighted laughter.

O. Henry Methods

Another scene that stands out in my memory was the interior of a laundry shop on a holiday—every detail worked out with the most adorable humor and precision. The little laundress's assistant, with her pug nose and wisps of pale hair, has been cherishing the shirt and cuffs of the big laboring man who never came for them because, as she thinks, he went to the war (why else should one abandon a shirt with cuffs?), and after hours she gets them out and dreams of the day when he may come back for them. Every week she surreptitiously launders them over, so that they may be fresh for his arrival, and then, of course, he comes, bringing an atmosphere of the factory with him which is most realistic, and when he finds how heartbroken she is it ends by his leaving the shirt on the counter and going to war, after all. A crude enough plot, as I tell it, but worked out as simply and with as much dignity as an O. Henry story.

Then there is Alan Brooks, a delightful person who has written a comedy called "Dollars and Sense," in which he takes the leading rôle, dividing the stage into three separate scenes, and holding the stage in breathless suspense despite the difficulty of transferring the interest from one section of the scene to the other. All these acts demand acting of a higher stamp than any I have seen on the legitimate stage for many years, and one reason they are so convincing is undoubtedly because the material used is original and represents the life of Americans in American settings, no matter how humble.

Dancing

Our comic spirit is perhaps most highly developed in our dancing, but so popular is dancing at the present time that the lights of even the humblest are not likely to be hidden under a bushel or to need much description. Yet I can think of dozens of men who are doing work which for humor and subtlety far surpasses all our highbrow attempts at pantomine, which rages once in so often in all the little art theaters.

There is a team now doing small time on the vaudeville circuit—Emma Haig and Lou Lockett—who do a dance which is the quintessence of quiet humor and beautiful as well, with its hovering and never-ending rhythm of steps which melt into each other like a stream of motion. Any one who thinks that buck and wing dancing is easy for a woman to acquire is invited here and now to try it. It is almost the hardest thing on earth, and, unlike ballet dancing, cannot be got merely by routine effort; either it is in you or it isn't, and the chances are 99 to 1 that it isn't. One could enumerate by the hundred men who have brought this art to apparent perfection, as far as technique is concerned. It was left for George Cohan to add to it the style and distinction which turn it into pantomime of a very high order.

Women's dancing is less American, as our natural versatility and the teachings of the exceedingly bad schools of dancing which flourish all over the United States have prompted feminine dancers to use snatches of everything which they have ever seen done and much that they have seen has been imported. The Castles did a good deal to help standardize American ballroom dancing, and a still further step has been taken by Dorothy Dickson and Carl Hyson, whose distinguished and piquant work strikes again that note of youthful sophistication peculiar to the American girl, of which Miss Dickson, with her broad shoulders and small head and appearance of frailty, is a very charming example. But the dancer who has made the most important contribution of all is Bessie McCoy Davis, for to a consummate ease and grace of technique she adds all the whimsical delicacy of other dancers plus a very masculine feeling for the humorous and the grotesque, a combination which fills her work with variety and gives one the feeling, whenever she leaves the stage, that she has by no means exhausted her possibilities. There is a sweep and brilliancy to her lyric dancing which is in interesting contrast to her comic work, always full of strong characterization. I have in mind particularly the "Marionette Dance," in which her motions are made to appear as though controlled by the ropes which hold her up. After the loose, fantastic dance has died down and she becomes just a bundle of sticks, she is dumped back into the box out of which she had come, with her poor wooden face hanging limply over the edge, then that, too, with a final flop falls into the box, the lid is slammed down and the poor manikin is trundled off behind the scenes to slow and solemn music—the effect, so humorous before, is unexpectedly turned into drama, and tragedy and comedy for a moment join hands. It is this artistry which makes Miss McCoy's work unforgettable.

But all these examples of the comic spirit are scattered, and must, as a rule, be searched for among a great deal of chaff. There is, however, one field where all this American charm is focused into something really constructive, and that field is musical comedy.

In Musical Comedy

Here is a form which every one recognizes and accepts as something vivid and American and interesting. I endeavored to find out just how it has evolved into what it is, but no one seems quite to know.

Marc Klaw prophesies that musical comedy of the future is going to be musicalized farce, with more plot and less scenic effect; another manager deplores the introduction of plots and is all for the spectacular "revue." Harold Stearns, on the contrary, thinks that musical comedy fails because it tries to be a glorified vaudeville, and wishes a return to the old-fashioned operetta. And in the mean time the form seems to be defying all of these rules and becoming more and more a subtle mixture of satire, comedy and characterization strung on a slight plot and supported by a great deal of music and costume and elaborate scenery. With all these elements uniting and reuniting fifty or sixty times a season on Broadway, each striving to offer something that will outdo the other—"something," as Gertrude Stein would say, ought certainly to be coming of it.

And what is coming of it seems at any rate to be a purely American product, whimsical, gay, light as thistledown and essentially comic.

Here, if anywhere, we must look for the flowering of a new American art, and in scenery, dialogue, song, music, dancing and lighting one sees it flashing forth—this new, shy, brilliant thing we call the American spirit.

What possibilities it holds, not only for the human side of art, where already it vies with the newspapers in its running commentary on affairs of the moment, but on the artistic side as well! What possibilities for the arrangement of beautiful and expressive movement! We were all dazzled by the marvelous effects of the Russian ballet, which was based upon this idea. Applied to our popular musical comedies, such an art would come nearer home, would be less feverishly exotic but no less alive, and no less lacking in variety.

As to Settings

One turns in this connection instinctively to the work of Gordon Craig. The solemn grandeur of his designs for a new theater seem at first glance alien to what we have been speaking of; it will be many years before Americans cease to turn with the embarrassment of schoolboys from anything which is deeply emotional, as these designs certainly are. But like all great things they have their humorous possibilities, which I have tried to indicate in the accompanying sketches, especially in the one with the great round pillar. This was designed as the sleepwalking scene in "Macbeth," and in the original only one figure appears—that of Lady Macbeth descending the long steps, candle in hand, and leaving a little shadow of herself on every step.

Now, regard this scene as a musical comedy setting—as a stage for a chorus of a hundred—and see what vast possibilities it still has for beauty. Flame-colored dancers pour out of the doors, making beautiful and complicated designs as they swarm up and down the great flight of stairs.

"Impractical," you will say; "you cannot get masses of people to dance on steps; the floor must be flat."

Yet in the great revue given at the Century Theater a few years ago Mr. Dillingham achieved this very thing on a flight of steps that soared up into the roof and out of sight, and the dancers he assembled on these steps did the most elaborate buck and wing dancing right to the edge of every step, keeping perfect time with each other.

Only instead of the soft and magnificent lighting which the Gordon Craig design suggests Mr. Dillingham's lighting was crude, and his steps painted like a plaid shawl, and the costumes in red and blue and yellow diamonds, an effect so hideous and nerve racking that it must be seen to be depreciated. Yet here was the same idea in embryo.

The other drawing which I have reproduced shows the dramatic possibilities of contrasting many people and voices with one. I will describe it in Mr. Craig's own words.

Julius Cæsar
Act III, Scene 2
The Forum

"Here we see Marc Antony addressing half Rome. A hundred thousand citizens are seen at the back. Marc Antony leans toward them and away from us. You hear his shrill high voice. In the front nearest us there is silence. There the conspirators wait.

"What I felt here was the crowd and the two parties. I had to bring all these in and divide them up so that we should feel the division clearly. I put the crowd furthest off because, although a hundred thousand voices can drown one when they are between you and the speaker, still a hundred thousand voices make an excellent background to the voice of a personality. For instance, I never knew distant thunder, however mighty it was, to interrupt a conversation.

"The man who persuades the crowd is in the middle distance.

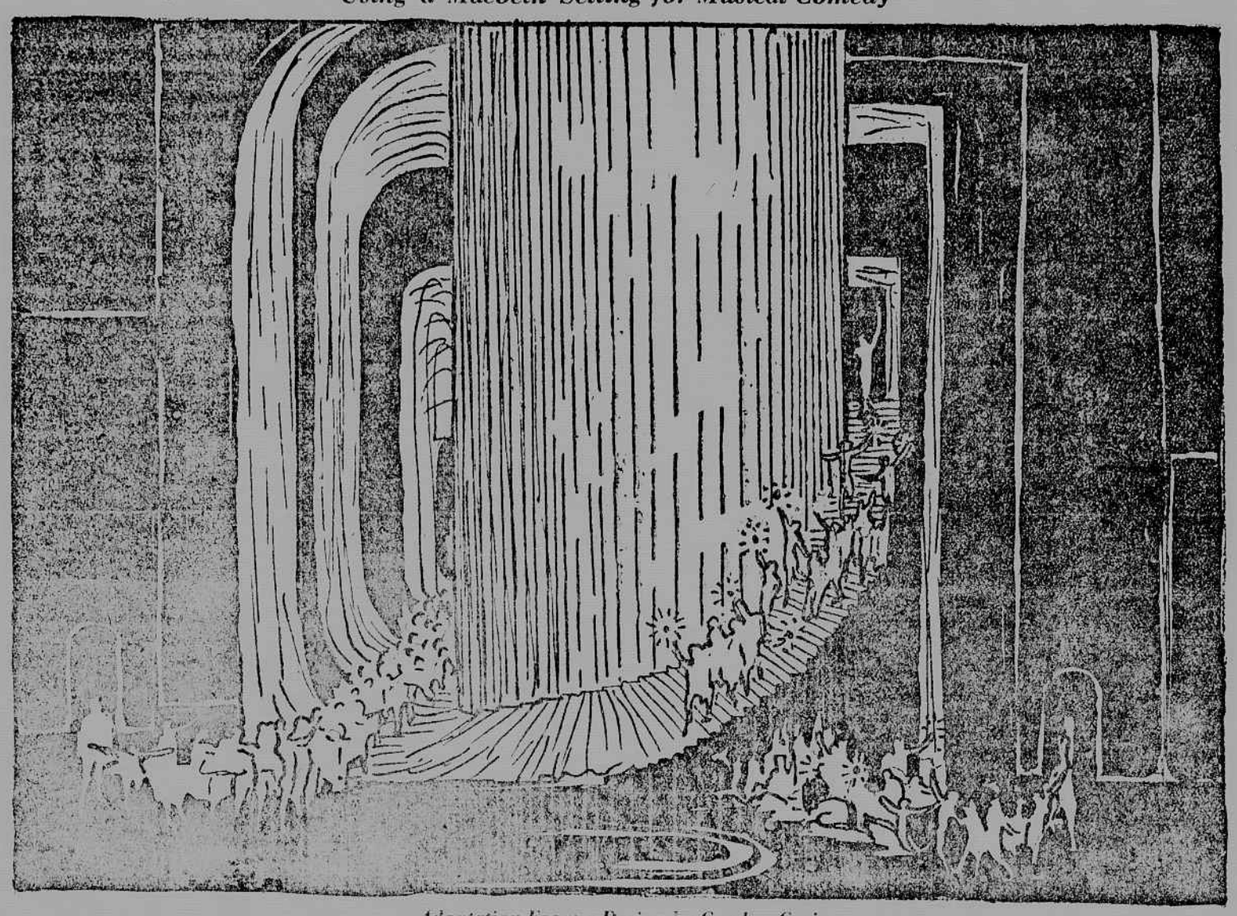
"Those against whom he is persuading are in the foreground.

"The silence can be felt."

Now, in place of these dramatic characters, put into this scene, in your imagination, a group of dancers. Upon the rock in the middle distance your solo dancer, with the painted audience behind her on the drop curtain, adding to the effect of space. And in the foreground the chorus, dancing with her, but in shadow, the light concentrated upon the figure whose movements they echo. How much finer than the present system of lining the chorus up on the very heels of the soloist—the colors in their costumes clashing with hers and their violent movements detracting instead of adding to the effect she is making.

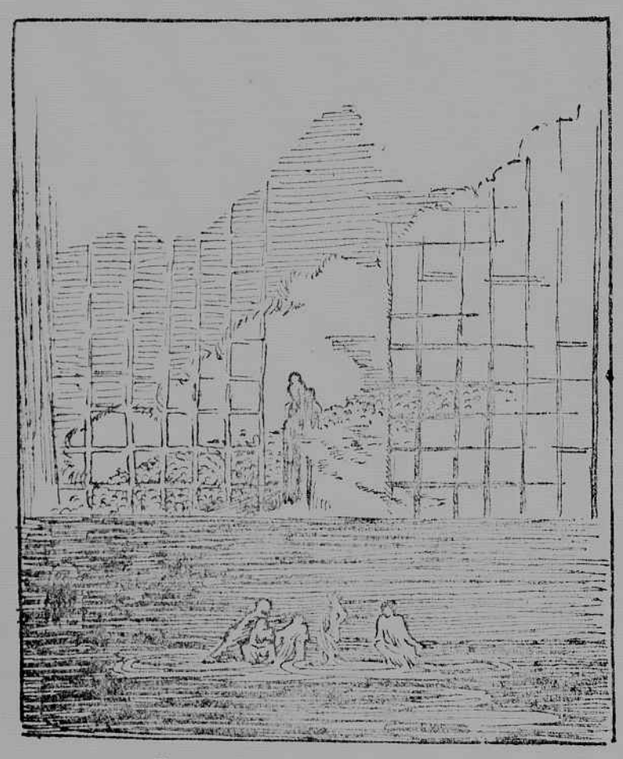
Mr. Craig's wonderful book is about a thousand years ahead of his time, yet it is not too much to hope that out of the brilliant moving mass of light and gayety and color which throngs across the American stage may come the beginnings of what will indeed prove a new theater and a new art.

Using a Macbeth Setting for Musical Comedy



Adaptation From a Design by Gordon Craig

Julius Cæsar



From a Drawing by Gordon Craig

Bessie McCoy, in "The Marionette Dance"

A Memory Sketch